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Abortion is nothing like hiring a hitman, whatever Pope Francis says

Arianne Shahvisi

Pope Francis has compared having an abortion to “hiring a hitman to resolve a problem”. The leader of the Catholic Church made the comment during a speech in which he declared that it is always wrong to end a human life. While this has always been the line taken by the church, this comparison condemns abortion in particularly strong terms.

Some careful reasoning shows that comparing abortion with contract murder equates two acts that are far from obviously morally equivalent. To begin with, it would be a challenge to find a person who thinks that cold-blooded murder, of the sort carried out by hitmen, is morally acceptable.

Yet many people believe that abortion is morally acceptable, often on the basis that only a pregnant woman herself can determine whether an abortion is right or wrong for her in that moment. We also know that most women don’t regret their abortions, which shows that their moral intuitions seem pretty reliable.

Taking control

“Hiring a hitman to resolve a problem” is not only morally troubling because it involves murder, it is also troubling because it is cowardly: a person should not induce others to commit heinous acts, while keeping their own hands clean.

In the case of abortion, the “hitman” of the analogy is presumably a health care provider in places where abortion is legal, or a backstreet abortionist in places where it’s not. Yet it’s not accurate to claim that women are attempting to palm off an unwelcome task on someone else. Women have long sought more control over their abortions, which means less involvement from medical professionals.

Most abortions are straightforward early terminations, for which abortion pills are safe and effective. Many choose to self-administer these pills, even where abortions are legal, thereby removing doctors from the process altogether.

What’s more, in places where abortion is legal, health care providers are allowed to refuse to provide abortion care for reasons of conscience. While a hitman only gets paid if the job is done, health care providers can refuse to perform abortions and still draw their salaries.

Indeed, in Italy, where the Pope’s words are particularly influential, 70% of gynaecologists conscientiously object to abortion, leaving women with limited access to abortions, even though they have been legal for four decades.

Who gets ‘moral status’?

Next, a hitman’s victim is an existing person who has “moral status” – that’s a philosophical term which means they are morally significant, and harms and benefits to them must be considered when making decisions. All humans have moral status, and many of us believe that animals do too (although our food and farming practices may indicate otherwise).

It's not clear whether fetuses have moral status, or at what stage of their development they might acquire it. Some insist that fetuses attain moral status at conception. Others argue that moral status is acquired once the fetus becomes "viable", which means it could survive outside the womb. Others still contend that moral status isn't acquired until birth.

Philosophers continue to debate this point, and a consensus is unlikely to be reached. But in the early 1970s, philosopher Judith Jarvis Thompson offered a short-cut through the dilemma.

Thomson presented the following example: imagine that you wake up to find another person plugged into your bloodstream. They have had a serious accident, and a group of people who care about them have discovered that you are the only person whose blood can save this person, so they have kidnapped you for this purpose.

The person requires access to your blood for nine months, otherwise they will die. Now, clearly this person is morally significant, and clearly it would be better if they didn't die. But surely it's unreasonable to expect a person to support another life without their consent?

Restoring bodily autonomy

This scenario highlights the fact that while we all have a right to life, that does not mean we have the right to use other people's bodies in order to stay alive. As well as the right to life, we also have a right to bodily autonomy, which means that each person is entitled to determine how her body is used.

An abortion ends a life which was dependent on another life; a hitman ends the life of an independent human being. Or, to put it another way, an abortion restores women's right to bodily autonomy at the same time as violating a fetus' (debatable) right to life, while hiring a hitman straightforwardly violates another person's right to life.

So no, a woman seeking an abortion is not like a person hiring a hitman. Indeed, you could flip Pope Francis' analogy around. Globally, around 25m unsafe abortions take place each year, leading to the deaths of more than 22,800 women. Data shows that the number of abortions doesn't decrease when abortion is illegal – the procedure simply becomes more risky, and more lethal.

Regardless of one's views about abortion, the reality is that denying women access doesn't save fetuses – it simply kills more women. And health care providers, who Pope Francis appears to call "hitmen", are critical to saving women's lives. In fact, one could reasonably accuse religious and political leaders of wielding their tremendous power to use laws like hired hitmen; putting women's lives in danger while keeping their own hands clean.